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AUTHOR Eskey, David E.
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ABSTRACT

"Advanced student" is defined here as the kind of student who can converse with native speakers and read simplified or simple English prose at reasonable rates with good comprehension. Such a student, however, is still not ready for university-level reading. The major problem for the teacher is not teaching English words but English structures. Most foreign students are word-by-word readers, whereas good comprehension entails reading by structures. The syntax of unsimplified written English typically exhibits a degree of complexity much greater than that of the spoken language, and far too difficult for most students at this level. It seems unlikely that they can be taught to read by structures, using such mechanical means as reading against time through simplified sentences physically divided into simplified constituents. The author describes a sample lesson designed to help the student work his own way up from the simple structures he already knows to new and more complex constructions. Real mastery of the more complex constructions, the author points out, can only follow from extensive reading; but the student who has worked his way through these lessons will "have the one great advantage of knowing what he is doing." (AMM)

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# A New Technique for the Teaching of Reading to Advanced Students

David E. Eskey

University of Pittsburgh

By advanced students I mean the kind of students Ted Plaister of the University of Hawaii described in a talk he delivered two years ago at this convention,[1] the kind of students who can already converse with native speakers, understand and give directions, order a meal or buy a ticket, employ simple patterns correctly in writing, and, most important for my purposes here, read simplified or simple English prose at reasonable rates with good comprehension. Plaister went on to point out that such students, though functionally "operational" (and relatively rare), are still not ready for university-level reading. He therefore devoted the bulk of his paper to describing the reading program at Hawaii intended to prepare them for this higher level.

That program is exceptionally well worked out. Each applicant is pre-tested for reading vocabulary, comprehension, and speed and assigned to an appropriate course, if any. The program then provides him with direct instruction in what good (and bad) reading habits are and in whatever in the assigned readings seems likely to the teachers to lead to cross-cultural misunderstanding. More practically, the student must work his own way through an impressive variety of exercises designed to increase his vocabulary and, especially, his reading speed. All of this is possibly and much of it unquestionably useful to the student who wants to read English better, but the emphasis on speed reminds me of a world-weary colleague's remark that in reading English our students are unsafe at any speed.[2]

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There is more to this apparently flippant remark than meets the eye. It points directly to one question this paper tries to answer: Why can't many of our advanced foreign students understand university-level readings in English?

Vocabulary is part of the problem but only part. To meet it most programs and all the well-known graded readers employ a system of gradually expanding vocabulary, but in the long run the only way to acquire an adequate vocabulary is, for foreign students as for native speakers, simply to read more. The major teaching problem here, it seems to me, is not English words but English structure. Plaister notes, for example, that most foreign students are word-by-word readers whereas good comprehension entails reading by structures, and this is a critical clue to the real problem. Hawaii treats it as simply a bad habit to be broken by physically dividing a set of English sentences into two columns of three or four word structures and then forcing the students to read through them against time. But this is surely an oversimplified approach.[3] It assumes that the students have always read this way, whereas I seriously doubt that most of them are word-by-word readers in their own languages. They read English this way not out of habit but because they have never mastered the structure of unsimplified written English.

One may argue that any kind of English is English, but the fact is that the spoken and written forms of the language are not the same. Anything that can be written can in theory be said, but the kinds of sentences that actually get said and the kinds that actually get written are by no means identical. In addition to some obvious differences in vocabulary, the syntax of unsimplified written English typically exhibits a degree of complexity much greater than that of the spoken language.

There are differences and some of them must be taught.

Consider, for example, the following two sentences:

1. The Mongol horde destroyed the armies of Islam.
2. The armies of Islam destroyed the Mongol horde.

The words of these two sentences are exactly the same but, assuming a basic understanding of the vocabulary, any native speaker and any moderately proficient non-native speaker will see at one reading what the sentences mean and that they mean different things. Of the six sentences that follow, however, five are synonymous with Sentence 1 and only one (sentence 8) with Sentence 2, and I am not at all sure that many non-native speakers (or even all native speakers) will see this at one reading:

3. The armies of Islam were destroyed by the Mongol horde.
4. It was the armies of Islam that the Mongol horde destroyed.
5. It was the Mongol horde that destroyed the armies of Islam.
6. What the Mongol horde destroyed was the armies of Islam.
7. What destroyed the armies of Islam was the Mongol horde.
8. The Mongol horde was destroyed by the armies of Islam.

But this is only a beginning. Of the following ten noun phrases, eight are nominalizations of Sentence 1, two (Sentences 14 and 18) of Sentence 2, and when we note that all would in fact occur as the embedded subjects, objects, or complements of still other sentences, we begin to get an idea of the structural complexity that readers of unsimplified English must deal with. None of these structures is rare in writing, after all, and neither of the two lists is anything like complete:

9. that the Mongol horde destroyed the armies of Islam
10. that the armies of Islam were destroyed by the Mongol horde
11. for the Mongol horde to have destroyed the armies of Islam

12. the Mongol horde's having destroyed the armies of Islam

13. the Mongol horde that destroyed the armies of Islam

14. the armies of Islam that destroyed the Mongol horde

15. the armies of Islam that the Mongol horde destroyed

16. the Mongol horde's destruction of the armies of Islam

17. the destruction of the armies of Islam by the Mongol horde

18. the destruction of the Mongol horde by the armies of Islam

Clearly many synonymous constructions look quite different, and it is just as true that many constructions that look alike are not. To borrow a famous example from literature, Tennyson's

19. the murmuring of innumerable bees

and John Crowe Ransom's

20. the murdering of innumerable beeves

are grammatically as well as phonologically less alike than they seem.[4] Although the structure of the two phrases looks identical at first glance, any native speaker "knows" (in Chomsky's limited sense) that 19 is synonymous with "innumerable bees murmur" (that "bees" is the logical subject of "murmur"), whereas 20 is synonymous with "(someone) murders innumerable beeves" (that "beeves" is the logical object of "murder")

Given this complexity, it seems extremely unlikely that students can be taught to read by structures by such mechanical means as reading against time through simplified sentences physically divided into simplified constituents. I doubt that most advanced students are retarded readers, as this mechanical approach would seem to imply. They would automatically read English by structures if they could, but English structure at this level is simply too much for them.

My point in short is that advanced English structure should be taught to students who must tackle advanced English reading, and that it should be taught in conjunction with this reading where (in contrast to normal speech) it commonly occurs.

For some years I have been working at a set of materials designed to implement these assumptions, and this set has now acquired something like a final form.[5] The great problem has always been one of selection: What can be omitted on the grounds that most advanced students know it? And what must be included on the grounds that they do not? Aside from the general problem of unusual inversions and a few particularly troublesome subordinators (like unless), the two large problem areas that have gradually emerged are the various kinds of complex noun phrases, and the free modifiers like participles and, especially, non-restrictive clauses. Since all of these constructions involve the whole complex of relationships to be found in full sentences, it is hardly surprising that even fluent foreign students find them difficult at first. Many a native speaker is not entirely at home with them, and it is well to keep in mind that we ask foreign students at our universities to read material which might be too difficult structurally (as well as in other ways) for the average American waitress or bus driver.

The problem then is how to teach advanced structure in conjunction with the advanced reading of which it is typical. Since reading is a skill, that is, something students do, some kind of inductive method seems to be called for within which the student can work his own way up from the simple structures that he knows to the complex constructions that are largely new to him, and this is the general method of the materials.

Consider, for example, the sample lesson designed to introduce a particular type of complex noun phrase. This lesson is one of about six dealing with the structure of noun phrase complements. For pedagogical convenience, these and the others involve a certain amount of grammatical jargon,

## SAMPLE LESSON

## INFINITIVAL NOUN PHRASE COMPLEMENTS

It is not enough that a thing be possible for it to be believed.

---Voltaire

People will not believe a thing just because it is possible.

Even if a thing is possible that is not enough to make people believe it.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | (Matrix S) | It (something) is not enough. |
| 2. | (Constituent S) | A thing is possible. |
| 3. | (Constituent) | that a thing is possible |
| 4. | (Constituent) | that a thing be possible |
| 5. | (Matrix S + Constituent) | It (that a thing be possible) is not enough. |
| 6. | (S) | It is not enough that a thing be possible. |
| 7. | (S) | That a thing be possible is not enough. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 8. | (Matrix S) | That a thing be possible is not enough for (something). |
| 9. | (Constituent S) | People believe a thing. |
| 10. | (Constituent S) | It is believed by people. |
| 11. | (Constituent S) | It is believed. |
| 12. | (Constituent) | for it to be believed |
| 13. | (Matrix S + Constituent) | That a thing be possible is not enough for (for it to be believed). |
| 14. | (S) | That a thing be possible is not enough for it to be believed. |
| 15. | (S) | It is not enough that a thing be possible for it to be believed. |

Exercises

One: Complete this chart for these words: belief, believe, believable, possibility, possible, possibly.

| N | V | Adj | Adv |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |

Two: Write sentences using the words from the chart correctly.

Three: Notice the infinitival noun phrase complement for it to be believed..

but the total is not much more than what is here and all of it may of course be discarded once the students have mastered the structures themselves. It should be obvious that my bias is transformational, but these lessons are certainly not meant to teach any formal grammatical system. They deal almost exclusively with constructions that occur, that is, with surface structure only, thereby by-passing all the thorny questions of the nature of deep structure and of the kinds of rules required to relate it to real English sentences.

The technique for teaching a lesson like this is simply to ask a series of questions about the similarities and differences in form, function, and meaning among the members of a set of English structures arranged in ascending order of complexity. The teacher begins by reading a sentence, in this case a remark of Voltaire's, containing an example of the construction to be examined, in this case a type of noun phrase complement. Since many of the students may not immediately understand the sentence, the teacher then reads another sentence or two roughly the same in meaning but simpler in form and therefore easier to understand. Given the form and (via simpler forms) its meaning, the problem then is to relate the two in some step-by-step way that the students can follow.

This is provided by the numbered entries in the boxes. The matrix sentences are simply frames, marked for embedding by some kind of proform. Constituents are then developed and embedded, and this process is repeated until the original sentence reappears. Within each subset of forms the teacher always proceeds by asking the same two related questions:

1. What is the difference in <u>form</u> between this structure and the last one?
2. What difference, if any, does this make in the <u>meaning</u> ?

The change in form may make no difference in either function or meaning, a case of genuine structural synonymy (e.g., 3 to 4, or 6 to 7). Or the relationship of the parts may remain the same but the function of the constructions as a whole change, a change in functional meaning (e.g., 2 to 3, or 11 to 12).

Or there may be real expansion of both form and meaning (e.g., 7 to 8). But in all of these cases the student proceeds one comprehensible step at a time. The lessons themselves are also of course cumulative. This one presupposes a knowledge of factive noun phrase complements (that a thing be possible) so that the first box is both a kind of review and a useful preparation for the structure in the second (for it to be believed), which is new in form but similar to the factive complement in function.

The exercises that follow can all be done orally or in writing or, preferably, both. The first two are simple vocabulary problems and should ideally be done as homework before the lesson itself is introduced in class. The third (which is only suggested here) provides a summary of the forms of the new construction and of the contexts in which it normally occurs. This also includes an exercise or two in which the students must produce these forms and embed them in a sampling of the relevant contexts.

Let me conclude with three qualifications:

These materials are for advanced students only. They presuppose a class of students of the kind I described in my first paragraph and must not be imposed on beginners or intermediate students who have not yet mastered the basic patterns of English. Since the exercises move from the known to the unknown, from simple sentences that the students should comprehend immediately to complex sentences that they may not comprehend at all, they will not of course be of any use to students who are still struggling with the simple sentences.

To complete these materials is not to master English structure. Real mastery of the more complex constructions can only follow from extensive reading in the kind of English which naturally includes them, but in doing this the student who has worked his way through these lessons will have the one great advantage of knowing what he is doing.

These materials are not a complete course in reading. Such a course might include, for example, many of the features of programs like Hawaii's and would certainly include a great deal of outside reading. The intensive class exercises must always be complemented by extensive out-of-class reading of some kind, hopefully, once the exercises have been completed, by extensive university-level reading.

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## Notes

[1] "Reading Instruction for College Level Foreign Students," TESOL Quarterly, II, 3 (September 1968), 164-168. Plaister in turn took his definition of "foreign students who have reached or passed the operational level" from Schwab's "The Problem of the Advanced Student in American English" (Language Learning, X, 3 and 4 (1960), 151-156). As this sequence suggests, these students have a modern history of being ignored in foreign language teaching, possibly a by-product of the structuralist dogma that "language is speech." This position is not so much mistaken as misstated: the limited sense in which it is true hardly justifies such a sweeping generalization.

[2] Dr. Richard B. Noss, Chief Advisor to the English Language Center, Bangkok, in conversation.

[3] This is not a criticism of the technique itself, which is obviously useful in increasing reading rate provided that the material to be read is kept quite simple. Plaister remarks (p. 166) that "it is not uncommon to get 125-word-per-minute readers up to about 400 words per minute in one semester," but adds parenthetically that "this rate, of course is on quite simple material. What we are presuming is that the student will transfer his new reading habits to everything he reads." I doubt it.

[4] See the discussion involving Dell H. Hymes and René Wellek in Style in Language, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1960). pp. 112 and 412.

[5] An earlier version of these materials by George Montague and me was tested in the 1964 and 1965 Damascus summer institutes for Syrian teachers of English and in the reading classes of the American University of Beirut's University Orientation Program. Much of the early thinking was Montague's, one of the few real idea men I have met in language teaching. His last idea may have been his best, however: he has since left the field to try to get rich in business.